

Truitt welcomes fresh approach of new El Mirage mayor

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El Mirage's interim mayor said Monday that the future of the city and Luke Air Force Base are linked, and that community leaders have "no desire to close" the military facility.

Attempting to heal the rift between El Mirage and other West Valley communities created by former Mayor Fred Waterman, Michelle Kern released a letter stating the city's position regarding growth and its impact on Luke Air Force Base.

"I want to immediately clarify to our constituents the El Mirage leadership has no desire to close Luke Air Force Base," Kern said. "We have immense respect for its mission and the men and women who serve and work there. We are proud that many of them call El Mirage home."

Surprise Mayor Lyn Truitt said he is encouraged by Kern's stance in supporting Luke. "I'm impressed and encouraged by her strong stance in support of Luke and in her leadership in being so clear in the direction and plan on taking her community," Truitt said. "She has my support and appreciation." Truitt said it will take time for Kern to establish herself as the leader of her community. "And if she succeeds in unifying her community in support of Luke Air Force Base, then I think it would be an extremely positive, not only for her community, council and city, but the entire Valley," Truitt said.

The relationship among El Mirage, neighboring communities and the base became rocky earlier this year when Waterman, who resigned the mayor's post Friday after five years, questioned other mayors' integrity in dealing with Luke issues and the effect the base is having on the city's growth.

"I find that I have become a lightning rod for anger and negativity both from within and from outside of our city, mostly by those who do not know or understand all of the facts and issues which are at stake," Waterman said Friday. "I find myself in an impossible situation because I care for and respect our city, and would never intentionally do anything to bring discredit to it."

Kern did make it clear in her letter that Luke poses particular problems for city. "El Mirage absorbs more over-flights and land-use restrictions as part of the base's operations than any other West Valley city. As a result, the future of El Mirage and Luke AFB are linked. The prosperity of El Mirage and Luke AFB are not, and need not be, mutually exclusive," she wrote. "Therefore, El Mirage commits to working with Luke AFB and federal, state and local leaders to achieve economic security for El Mirage as well as preserve Luke AFB."

A possible option cited by Kern involved policy changes or statutory revisions that allow for more fully diversified economies in the areas surrounding Luke. One objective, she said, would be development agreements that assist El Mirage in attracting needed retail business, entertainment venues, professional services and high-quality industrial and manufacturing jobs.

But, she said, "It is neither our goal nor desire to expand residential development in the vicinity of Luke AFB." Kern said the city is researching the effect on the city that bringing F-35 jets to Luke could have on the community. Luke is working to be the training home of F-35 pilots.

"Citizens continue to request information regarding the F-35," Kern said. "It would be irresponsible to provide information until an intelligent, fair and coherent picture can be presented. We will soon hold a public forum to share information. The more input we all have, the better we can serve you, whether we are talking about Luke AFB or any other issue impacting El Mirage's quality of life."